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ABSTRACT

Panel studies examined changes in the educational and occupational aspirations of 191 rural Ohio youth. The 1988 survey questions were similar to those asked in a study conducted 3 years earlier when subjects were 10th and 12th graders. Major findings were: (1) the influence of school personnel on student career and curriculum choices was less than that of parents and friends, and declined from 1985 to 1988; (2) mother's educational attainment was related to student plans to attend college and the type of college chosen; (3) overall aspirations and salary expectations increased from 1985 to 1988, while desired occupations more nearly approximated expected occupations; (4) high school seniors were more confident of fulfilling their goals than either sophomores or graduates; (5) females had career expectations equivalent to males but expected lower salaries; (6) students in the academic curriculum had much higher occupational aspirations than those in the vocational curriculum, but the difference narrowed somewhat after high school graduation; and (7) although vocational students were much less likely than academic students to attend college, nearly half of the vocational students had higher education plans. (SV)

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A PANEL STUDY OF THE ASPIRATIONS OF RURAL YOUTH IN OHIO

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INTRODUCTION

Panel studies are used to follow the same group of subjects over a period of time. They enable examination of changes or trends. These differences between one point-in-time and another point-in-time may be due to changes within respondents or to societal trends. Rural communities, rural schools and rural youth have been facing economic stress in recent years. Local, state and national policy makers have found the delivery of educational services in rural areas increasingly challenging as rural populations have declined after a population surge in the 1970's, as student numbers have declined reflecting a general trend in school populations, and as economic resources have become more scarce due to the worsening farm economy and the general decline in state revenues in many U. S. states...The problem is particularly acute at the secondary education level where increasing demands by the public and state agencies for expanded curricular options are focused...Rural schools are encountering formidable challenges as they seek to make advanced electives available to their youth and to provide a curriculum that serves all of their children - those who pursue further education and those who enter the work force after leaving high school. (Thomas, 1987)

Students of high academic ability have had a wider range of educational and occupational opportunities available to them because of the premium American society has placed on academic achievement and the upward social and economic mobility it offers. The status of parents has been shown to influence the academic achievement of children. In turn this academic achievement influences the aspirations and expectations of students (Marini & Greenberger, 1978).

Aspirations have been shown to be among the most significant determinants of eventual attainment (Gottfredson, 1981). Among the first studies comparing the aspirations and expectations of rural and urban students were those conducted by Lipset (1955) and Sewell & Orenstein (1965). These studies concluded that rural youth had lower aspirations than urban youth and as a result they could not compete effectively for urban jobs. More recently Lee (1984) pointed out that rural workers were well behind their urban counterparts in vocational development.

Occupational aspirations have been shown to be influenced by the background and experience of the student. Aspirations are expressed in occupational goals, curriculum choices, and educational plans.

Study of the impact of the unique characteristics of rural schools on the educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth has not been widespread (Odell, 1986, p.43). Rural schools have been characterized by their small sizes, sometimes depressed economic situations, inability to maintain balanced staffs, and difficulty in offering broad and varied curricula.

Vocational agriculture has been the program for public school education in agriculture. Agricultural instruction must fit within the context of the entire school curriculum as an elective subject. It is increasingly difficult for college-bound rural youth to enroll in a course which provides the opportunity for them to develop a career interest in agriculture. This difficulty is expected to impact increasingly upon enrollment in higher education in agriculture.

In the Spring and Fall of 1985 data were gathered from four randomly selected rural schools representing four different geographical regions within the state of Ohio. Questionnaires were administered to all of the 10th and 12th grade students in each of the schools to ascertain their educational plans, occupational aspirations, and high school curriculum patterns. A portion of the findings from this study were reported by Odell (1986) who found rural high schools in Ohio emphasizing preparation for college attendance, enrolling students from families with low socioeconomic status, having students with much higher educational and occupational aspirations than that which their parents had attained, having students with unrealistic expectations for salary, and with aspirations of students influenced by parents expectations for them. He also discovered that students were planning careers in areas that were sex stereotypic (Odell, 1989). A major question remained as to the extent the aspirations of these youth changed over time.

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

An underlying purpose for this programmatic research effort was to respond to a need to understand the impact of changing rural communities on the aspirations of youth. This panel study was conducted to ascertain changes in the aspirations of rural youth as they matured during their high school years and entered college or the work force. Specific objectives were to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the sources of influence on rural youth as they make curriculum and career decisions in a 3-year period of time?

2. What changes occur in a 3-year period of time in desired and expected careers of rural youth?

3. How confident are youth that their occupational expectations will be realized?

4. How is gender related to expected salary, plans for further education, and level of aspirations?

5. How is the high school curriculum related to aspirations?

PROCEDURES

Procedures are reported under the headings of design, data source, instrumentation, and procedures to reduce errors.

Design

This study was descriptive survey. The major purpose of a descriptive survey is to describe the sample on the variables of interest, which were identified in the objectives. Relationships were analyzed to answer the research questions.

Data Source

Data were gathered in the first one-half of 1988 from a sample of the same subjects who were 10th and 12th graders in the 1985 study to determine changes which occurred in the 3-year period. Complete addresses were available for 352 subjects who participated in the 1985 study. Useable responses were obtained for 191 subjects, a 54% response rate, after use of telephone followup procedures. Comparisons between respondents and non-respondents were done on 1985 data. Respondents were more likely to be female, in the academic high school curriculum, and have a higher grade point average than non-respondents. The 1985 10th graders were nearing graduation or just out of high school and the 1985 12th graders had been out of high school for three years. These data were used to assess the durability of aspirations, education plans and occupational interests over this period of time. The sampling frame for rural schools included those schools located in a county outside a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area, which were located in an Ohio county of less that 40,000 people, which had less than 125 students in the average high school class, and which offered agriculture as a high school subject.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using a Student Information Questionnaire. Some student information was collected from the high school records. Questions for the instruments were written using instruments from previous research by Odell (1986) and the current work of the principal investigator. The content validity of the instruments was established by a panel of experts consisting of university faculty, school administrators, and former high school teachers. The instruments were pilot tested in a school that was not included in the sample for the study. An average test-retest reliability coefficient of .84 was obtained across questionnaire items.

Procedures to Reduce Errors

Appropriate steps were taken to reduce the five types of errors (measurement error, sampling error, frame error, selection error, and non-response error) normally associated with this type of research. While there was non-response error, its nature was reported and documented.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Information was summarized using descriptive statistics with the appropriate measures of central tendency and dispersion. Relationships utilized correlational techniques. Coefficients were evaluated using an alpha level of .05.

RESULTS

Results are reported under headings relating to each of the five objectives of the study.

Sources of Influence

In 1985 these youth, while in high school, had ranked the top four sources of influence on curriculum and career decisions as: self, parents, friends, and counselors. In 1988, the youth who had graduated listed self, mother and father, friends, and teachers as the top influencers. The youth who were 12th graders still in school in 1988 listed self, friends, father and mother, and counselors.

The educational attainment of the mother was related to educational plans of their children. A Cramer's V of .32 was obtained between the educational attainment of the mother and plans of 12th graders to attend college. Only 43.5% of the students having mothers with a high school education planned to attend college, but 100% of the students having mothers with a college or advanced degree planned to attend college. All of the students with mothers having a college or advanced degree planned to attend a 4-year college or university. Students with mothers having a high school education chose either technical college (43.5%) or a 4-year college or university (41.3%).

Changes in Desired and Expected Careers

Duncan Prestige Ratings were used to score desired and expected occupational goals. In 1985, the rural young people desired careers with slightly higher prestige scores (45.96) than they expected to attain (43.54). They had higher expectations in 1988 (46.93) than in 1985 (43.54). Also, their expected career (46.93) was more in line with their desired career (47.41).

Higher salaries were expected in their chosen careers in 1988 than in 1985. In 1988, 37.4% expected first-year incomes above $25,000; however, in 1985 only 16.7% of these same young people expected first-year incomes above $25,000.

In 1985, 39% of these youth intended to attend junior college. In 1988, only 5% attended or planned to attend junior college. In contrast, only 10% planned to go to a 4-year university in 1985 but 48% were attending or planned to attend one in 1988.

Confidence Expectations Would Be Realized

In 1985, over 50% of the youth were unsure if they could achieve their expected occupations. In 1988, over 50% of the graduated youth were also unsure of whether they could achieve their expected occupations, but only 27% of the youth still in high school were unsure of achieving them.

Gender and Salary, Education, and Aspirations

Females expected lower salaries than males (Cramer's V = .46). Only 9.1% of the females expected a first-year salary in their chosen career to be above $25,000; however, 51.0% of the males expected a first-year salary above $25,000.

Females were more likely (86.4%) than males (68.9%) to attend college. Among high school alumni, 95.1% of the females and 88.9% of the males who attended college did so immediately after high school. Among 1988 high school seniors, 68.2% of the females and 53.3% of the males planned to enter college immediately following high school.

Males and females did not differ in Duncan Prestige Rating score on either desired or expected careers.

Curriculum and Aspirations

All senior students in the vocational curriculum had low to medium job aspirations as scaled by the Duncan Prestige Rating. In contrast, 85.8% of the academic curriculum students had medium to high job aspirations. The Cramer's V relationship between curriculum and job aspiration level was .37. There was not a significant relationship between curriculum and job aspiration level for those youth who had graduated from high school.

The high school curriculum followed by students was related to their educational plans. Nearly all (97.2%) of the students in the academic curriculum were likely to attend college; however, 46.2% of the students in the vocational curriculum were also likely to attend college. A 4-year college or university was the choice of 71.2% of the academic program students. Students in the vocational program chose either a 4-year college or university (24.0%) or a technical school (20%). Senior students in the academic program planned to attend college immediately after high school (83.3%), but only 30.8% of the vocational program students planned to begin college immediately. Among alumni, 93.5% of those who went to college did so immediately after high school.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions were developed based upon the findings of the study. Implications were drawn from the findings and conclusions. Recommendations are for further research.

Conclusions

School personnel appear to have less influence on student career and curriculum choices than parents and friends. The influence of school personnel appears to decline as students mature. Friends seemed to have had more influence on curriculum and career decisions in 1988 than 1985 for youth still in school and less influence on youth who had graduated.

The educational level of the mother seemed to influence whether a child would attend college and the type of college to attend. Mothers with more education had children with higher collegiate expectation. The educational level of the father was not related to the educational plans of the child.

Overall aspirations increase with increasing maturity. Salary expectations also seem to increase with increasing maturity. Expected occupations also become more in line with desired careers. The junior college became a less popular choice and the 4-year college or university a more popular choice for students as they matured.

High school seniors appear to be more confident of fulfilling their aspirations than graduates or students who are sophomores.

Even though females aspire to careers that are equivalent to males, and even though they are more likely to attend college than males, they expect lower salaries.

The curriculum followed in high school was associated with the level of job aspirations of students. Those youth in the academic curriculum had much higher aspirations than those in the vocational curriculum. Once students left high school, however, the difference in level of job aspirations between those who completed the academic and vocational curricula was less.

Students in the vocational curriculum were much less likely to attend college than students in the academic curriculum. However, nearly one-half of the students in the vocational curriculum planned to attend college.

Implications

Parents should be involved in educational and career planning with their children. They have a major influence on their children's decisions. Schools should inform parents about options so intelligent input can be given to youth by their parents.

Friends and peers also seem to influence the educational and career plans of students. The self-image and confidence of students should be developed to the point that educational and career decision-making will become an individual matter.

Because the educational level of the mother appears to be related to educational plans of students, schools should make a special effort to encourage students from homes where mothers possess less than a college degree to set high aspirations.

Students should be encouraged to set high aspirations. Expectations appear to become more in line with aspirations with increasing maturity. This seems to come from an increase in expectations rather than a decrease in aspirations.

Females should be encouraged to set higher salary goals. When aspirations and qualifications appear equal, salary expectations remain lower for females than males. This may be partially due to females choosing occupations that are sex stereotypic, and thus traditionally offering a lower salary than traditionally male occupations.

High school students who enroll in vocational education should also be encouraged to prepare for college attendance. Schools should develop options for students to complete both vocational education and college preparatory requirements. Many students change their aspirations relating to college and career during high school.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research include: (1) comparisons between rural and urban students to determine similarities and differences between the

two populations, (2) comparisons between rural Ohio and rural communities in other states and regions to determine similarities and differences, (3) panel studies to ascertain trends in the image of agriculture as an educational and career option for students, (4) evaluation of the impact on rural communities of the highest-ability students pursuing careers which are unavailable in rural areas, (5) reasons for low salary expectations by females, and (6) further panel studies that focus on potential dropouts and students of lower ability, since these groups were under-represented in this study.

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